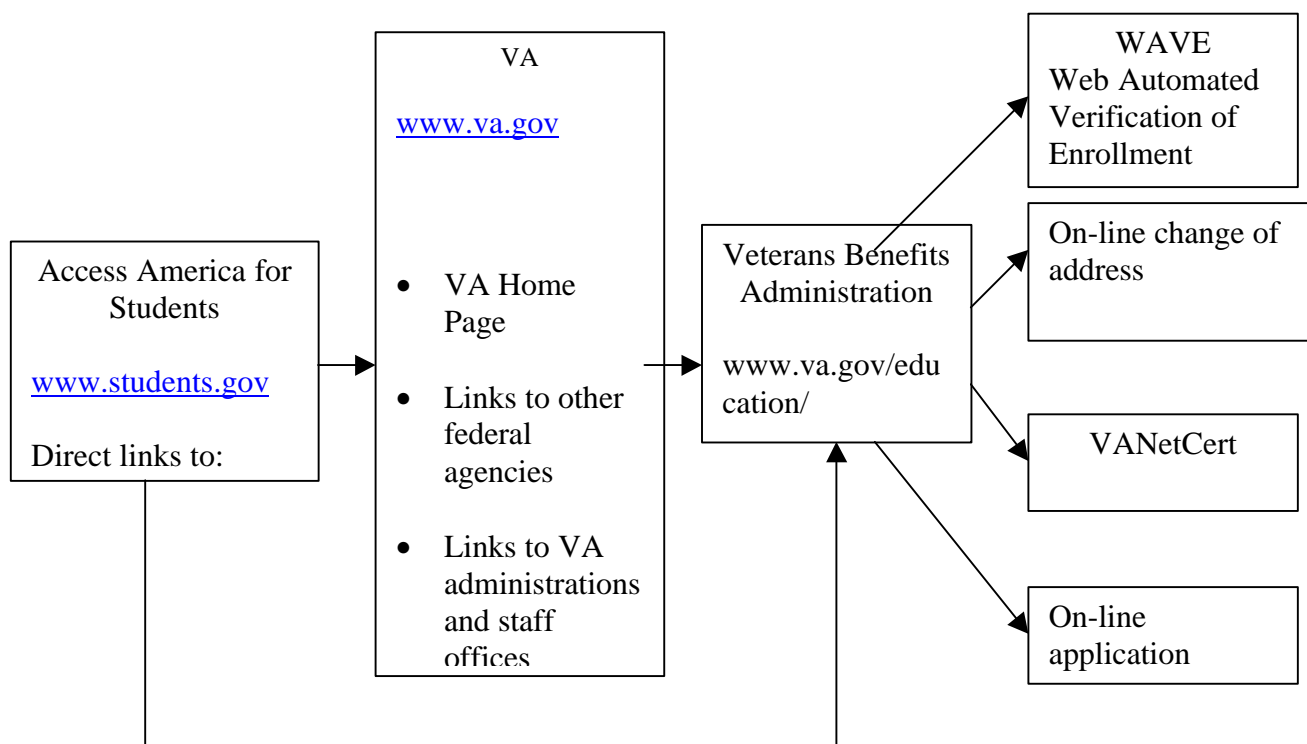


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## Appendix C

### DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM A VISION FOR BENEFIT AND SERVICE DELIVERY



#### General

Meeting the aggressive goals for enhanced customer service requires a radical departure from current processes. The Education Business Process Reengineering (BPR) team has created a dynamic vision for the Educational Assistance Program. The team began its redesign by defining six guiding principles to focus the vision and to address the core problems with the program. These guiding principles are:

- Dynamic, proactive awareness of customer needs
- Services and work processes built around customer needs
- Effective partnerships
- Streamlined procedures/simplified rules
- Standardized benefit programs
- Automation of routine work

Claims processing must be standardized and simplified in order for veterans and beneficiaries to fully understand and utilize their benefits, as well as to expedite processing. Veterans should be able to apply to a regionally accredited school of their

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choice, enroll electronically, attend classes, and receive benefits through the Montgomery GI Bill program with as few obstacles and delays as possible. This will require simplification of complex, outdated rules; elimination and reduction of paper; improved partnerships between DoD, schools, State Approving Agencies (SAAs), veterans service organizations, and VA internal organizations; and a rules-based expert computer system to process routine applications.

**The to-be vision changes the Educational Assistance Program processes to:**

- Begin outreach efforts shortly after servicemember agrees to have pay reduced
- Provide a fully electronic application process
- Increase training and use case management as a tool to improve accountability, quality and timeliness
- Provide partners (school officials, military, veterans service organizations) with access to data
- Streamline the monthly verification process to reduce burden on students
- Streamline inquiry resolution by providing beneficiaries toll-free access to RPOs
- Outbase education benefits specialists at schools and military outprocessing centers to conduct outreach and technical training
- Enhance and modify the SAA role to meet new process and program needs
- Simplify and update rules

## **TO-BE PROCESSES**

The VBA BPR team has created a dynamic vision for providing world-class service to VA's education customers.

The Educational Assistance Program has four core functions — processing claims, responding to inquiries, approving and monitoring programs, and providing outreach. The proposed vision makes each of these functions both more efficient and more focused on the customer.

### **Outreach and Communication**

**Outreach to servicemembers begins shortly after GI Bill election (Chapters 30 and 1606).** Outreach is a primary element of the to-be vision and is built into the process. When servicemembers sign the MGIB contract, informational letters will be sent to participants at predetermined intervals to advise them about program eligibility criteria, information on how and from where to obtain benefits, outline their individual eligibility status, and if the information is incorrect, whom they should see to initiate corrections. It is envisioned that the first letter to servicemembers will be issued shortly after enlistment (six to eight months), the second after initial eligibility is met (generally, 24 months active duty), and the third approximately three to six months prior to

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discharge. The last letter will include an “Education Benefits ID Card”<sup>1</sup> in which the basic eligibility data (except for the character of discharge) required for enrollment will be printed, along with VA’s communication network information (toll-free numbers, Internet address, etc.) so that servicemembers can conveniently place this card in their wallets for future reference.

Outreach to non-participating servicemembers is also envisioned. They will receive a letter acknowledging their denial of the MGIB. If this information is incorrect, the letter will direct them to the appropriate source for a correction. This will help to reduce the complicated process of correcting service information after discharge.

Automated letters currently sent to beneficiaries of the Chapter 35 education program will be revised and timing of those letters reviewed. These beneficiaries will also benefit from the Education Benefits ID Card as a handy tool to present to school officials to initiate the claims process.

To further improve outreach, VBA will work with DoD to redesign its TAP programs and presentations. The future outbased Education Services Team, as a communications and training network, should greatly enhance this service. It is envisioned that education employees will be stationed at some of the larger military outprocessing stations, most likely in the Base Education Offices, to provide training, transition briefings, and one-on-one case management.

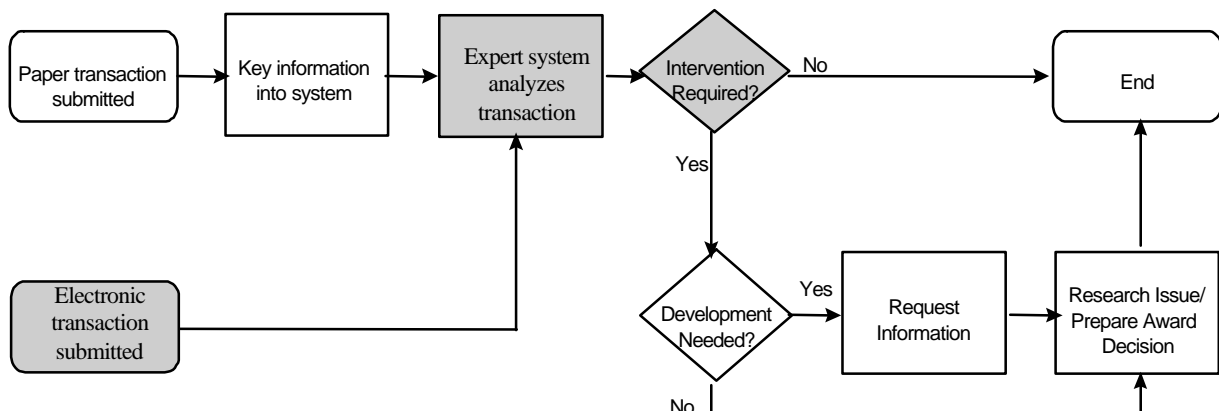
## **Claims Processing**

**A streamlined enrollment process for students and school officials.** When a veteran is ready to begin using his/her education benefits, the enrollment process will begin at the school. He or she will contact the certifying official or designee at the school/training establishment, for admission and registration. The veteran can present his/her VA Education ID Card to show basic eligibility by benefit program. If the certifying official wishes to verify the individual’s eligibility for benefits he or she may do so on-line through the Internet. In the majority of cases, most transactions will come in electronically and VBA’s rules-based expert system will automatically process these awards. If, however, no record of eligibility exists, the certifying official will submit the information to VBA and it will be “flagged” by the system to ensure processing by a case manager.

The following Figure 1 illustrates the streamlined educational claims process where routine claims are processed automatically and non-routine claims are processed by case managers.

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<sup>1</sup>The ID Card is not required for enrollment processing; rather it facilitates the process and provides a back-up in case the VBA systems are off-line.



*Figure 1: Vision for Education Claims Processing*

The current VACERT program will serve as the foundation for future electronic transmissions. This information will feed into the expert system that will check the approval and eligibility records, and if possible, process the award. Those which cannot be automatically processed will be referred to a case manager.

**Enrollment changes will be streamlined as well.** Schools will still be required to submit enrollment changes to VBA, but similar to the initial enrollments, these will be done electronically as school technology permits. The expert system will be able to determine the training time, the actual period of enrollment, and the amount of money the veteran is eligible to receive. Students will also be able to submit changes to VBA either electronically through the Internet or telephonically rather than through a paper-intensive method.

**A streamlined monthly verification process alleviates a paper-intensive burden for the student.** The monthly verification process will be modified to eliminate the monthly self-verification of enrollment form. However, monthly self-verification will still be required but accomplished through an automated response system or through an Internet application in which automatic processing will occur. Students will be notified of their monthly obligation to self-verify with every award letter that will provide information on the two access options. If a student does not self-verify through one of these systems within the specified time period, benefit payment will not be made until such time the veteran or school notifies VA, or VA develops for the individual's status. The new procedure emphasizes reduced printing/mailing costs; reduced effort in finance; no postage costs for customers; fewer payment delays; and, greatly reduced debt in all education programs.

**Case Management provides personal service and improves quality, accountability, and timeliness of claims.** Non-routine claims — those that cannot be

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automatically processed by the expert system — will be handled by case managers. Quality will be emphasized and each case manager will be held accountable for completion of “quality” claims. Unlike the present process in which paper applications, enrollments and supporting documents can pass through many hands, case managers will have total responsibility for completing all actions related to a claim. Case managers will have the authority and responsibility to interact with customers, make decisions, and identify and resolve issues at the earliest opportunity. If a claim requires additional evidence from the veteran, school or DMDC, the case manager will have access to a telephone or a system to obtain the information. This will reduce the back-and-forth letter writing that currently frustrates our customers. In addition, this team structure will notably improve timeliness as case managers will be able to resolve questions within hours, if not minutes, as compared to days or weeks.

**School officials will have access to claimant information to improve service.** Many trainees do not differentiate between certifying officials and VA employees — they often consult their certifying official when they have a question or problem with their benefits. They expect certain questions answered concerning their education benefits during their initial visit to the school. The quality of service varies depending on the tenure of the school official, the training he/she has received from VA, and the accessibility to VA personnel. Because of the continuing importance of the partnership with schools and training programs, the future vision calls for greatly enhanced accessibility of information to certifying officials. The VA will provide certifying officials with a support network for their individual training and outreach requirements. In addition, it will provide them with remote access to data systems to answer routine questions concerning individual eligibility. A school official will be able to check eligibility and payment status on-line and provide general information to the student as his/her representative.

Currently, VBA has an Internet web-site for veteran-students and school certifying officials ([www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov)). In addition to general information, school officials can register to be included on our mailing list for e-mail messages concerning changes and proposed changes to education benefits, notices of processing problems and newsletters. This service will be enhanced and encouraged during future outreach and training efforts.